

Arlington Cultural Commission
Thursday May 2. 7:30pm

Present: Dave Ardito, Adria Arch, Nora Mann, Roly Chaput, Barbara Costa

Guests: Tova Speter, Howard Rossman (Dearborn Director), Bob Sprague, Kurt Fusaris, Scott Samenfeld (resigned Cultural Commission member)

Call to order: 7:35pm

ITEM 1: Bus Depot Mural

Introductions of participants:

ATED, Town Meeting, Arlington Public Art, The Arlington Cultural Council, K-12 Public Schools Art Department were represented amongst the participants in addition to the ACC, artist, media

Introduction to Discussion:

The goal of the discussion was set out as one of understanding what happened without placing blame. It was acknowledged that the town has made several statements in support of the arts over the last few years. How can our town grapple with public art, public art on private property and how we can use this as a teachable moment.

Comments from stakeholders, Tova Speter, artist and Howard Rossman, Director of Dearborn Academy

Tova: I am at the center having corresponded with all so here is my account/ the mural was a wonderful community project. It took a long time to get approval from all constituents. It was put up in fall of 2008. The planning and idea started in 2006. It was the first piece of public art in town and took multiple years to get permission from the town. There was concern about letting kids paint outside but eventually earned approval. The mural was designed by and painted by Dearborn students. At least 100 hands were in this project. We got a grant from Arlington Cultural Council and approval from MBTA.

I have worked with many contacts from MBTA. They are a big mass and they don't all communicate. There is the transit, design and construction departments. I have done several projects with them. There are lots of moving parts, but there was a process of getting a license and permit and approval letter. They say on the application that nothing is going to be permanent, as there will may be a change to a building because of maintenance, repairs, etc. There is no clause that says what needs to happen if there needs to be a change. End date says: "To be up as long as possible." From other interactions, there is never an

intention of destroying. Some reps from MBTA actually participated in painting. They were there at ribbon cutting. We received a Gold Star award and were recognized by State, and the mural was celebrated at first piece of community public art in town.

Carol contacted me at the end of last summer saying that something was potentially happening to the building and asked if I was aware of it. She wanted to let me know. I went to the MBTA and tried to ask them what was happening. Multiple people confirmed for me that they although there may be some changes to the space, something might be happening but that there would be no changes to the mural. I went back to Carol by email and Howard and said she checked with MBTA who assured her nothing was happening to the mural.

Bob Sprague and a friend then told me months later that the mural had been destroyed. I went back to MBTA, everyone from the list, and they said they still had no idea of what was happening there. They were not part of it. So I still don't know who gave permission for renovation. They seem to be not the same people who gave permission for mural.

I also have suggestions on what to do now:

- I do community murals all over the place. It always depends who your partner is. The MBTA is just such a big system. There is nothing in their paperwork that says you have to contact the artist if something happens. Artists should try to get it added into contracts with partners or with the Town if the Town is a partner.

- Artists should be given the chance to document. We should encourage a minimum life expectancy, such as, "every best effort will be made to have the piece up for at least five years".

- Maybe someone designated in the town to be a contact. Town should have an interest in the maintenance of its public art.

- When you try to get funding for the project, there should be some funding set aside and a person who is designated for maintenance.

- I liked Scott's idea of making a keychain that is sold at the store with proceeds going toward public art, greeting cards, or bumper sticker saying "Arlington Public Art". Perhaps a tote bag?

- Encourage the store or MBTA to invite Dearborn back again to do something else on the wall or, to commitment to public art, have the Town identify a space that Dearborn students can work on in the fall. One way to move forward is to rally around a new project. We could do still do a celebration for this project, do a slide show, speaker, article on front page of a paper that pays respect and says goodbye.

We should do this because the students worked so hard. It had a great impact on students evident at dedication ceremony.

We should show that there is a commitment to public art in town.

Adria: There is actually another mural which we raised money for and got the sign bylaw changed so it could be put up.

Nora- Did you have to get permission from town because of sign bylaw? Originally, this project was painting switchboxes, which met with a lot of opposition from the town. People were very worried about art in the town at that time.

Tova: This felt like a big success. It was very meaningful in having been part of the first piece of public art and helping the town to embrace public art.

But I've learned you have to protect yourself and participants. I am very concerned about how this happened. I am confused about Carol's role. Who in the town knew that something was still going on? Somebody knew, so that part is curious to me. Carol knew to contact me. At what point did the breakdown happen with the Town? When I came back and said no everything is fine, why didn't those who knew about and saw construction, get back in touch with me?

Tova was invited to come back and help us figure out what role we can play in helping to foster and protect public art.

Howard Rossman: I don't want to make this a lament because it is what it is. The kids are not there any longer, but this was a massive effort. Tova raised an important issue about process. It's gone. If we had had this meeting before this happened a month ago, we could have done something. And it raises question of what is the value of public art in Arlington. We thought it would be there for a while. It felt like a quasi municipal project since we did had to get approval. One of the purposes of mural the and boxes being painted was to make it harder for graffiti to be spread over town and there hasn't been any graffiti on it. Do you want public art? If so, how do you protect it? It was part of the pride of being part of this town. Many of the calls we have received from people are from those who looked at it while sitting at Panera's. Do you do and then tell or ask and then do?

Tova: It comes down to respect for the artwork. What did they do with piece of Paul Revere? They could have cut it carefully and reinstalled it to the school?

Howard: The perception from the school is that it didn't matter.

Nora: If there is a perception that it is a municipal project then it raises the stakes

because the town is committed to transparency and exercising stewardship around its history, and its art. I can't speak for town, but if town had feelings, it would say, we don't want people to feel like it didn't matter because it did.

Tova: It felt like a coming together of MBTA, students, community at large and the Town. All were represented at the dedication. The Town Manager cut the ribbon. The mural was recognized by the State. It made the kids feel so proud to be involved. This was not just a mural in school, but a town thing. The award elevated the project. The Town signed off on application to MBTA - Brian Sullivan signed. He was the applicant.

Howard: The Commission for Blind is a great organization, but this is a little like what happened in Lexington. Someone had wetlands in their backyard. And someone built on it. When the someone said something, someone else says they didn't know.

Kurt - As the (Arlington Cultural) Council, we considered whether or not we should draft a letter to the Advocate, after the destruction expressing a real disappointment, displeasure in the fact that this is happened and the way it happened, unilaterally, without discussion. This was a product of a confluence of organizations but when it came to an end, it felt like one person making the decision, counter to how it came together.

As to the point about permanence vs. non-permanence. Public art not necessarily meant to be permanent, but if it does come to an end, how do we respect and celebrate it, take pieces, do something that will allow it to live in posterity. We can't change history, but this is instructive and will inform us in terms of a process, since we want to make Arlington a place where Public art can be appreciated. I was glad to see Town Meeting approved public art fund so I think the Town is serious.

Tova: I saw a draft but we wanted to wait and tread carefully so there was no immediate reaction. Nothing was said. It has been kind of quiet. There were only two very general articles.

Kurt: We wanted to make sure we checked our facts first. Also in that discussion we determined that since Scott was talking to Joe Curro, maybe we could work this out. There may be better avenues than a letter.

Tova: This is quietly happening and it isn't public. That delay in making sure we proceed correctly just makes it feel like it didn't matter.

Nora: This is an initial discussion in a process in using this experience as a teachable moment. When things are used as a teachable moment it has a more long lasting effect. What we want to do as a community is see how this can inform how public art is dealt with in the future.

It is not our role as a Commission to characterize this incident but to help the town learn from this for the future.

Tova: as long as the teachable moment is for the community as well. It was a public, community project. 100's of people who contributed and they have no voice and are not hearing anything addressed to them.

Nora: this is a public meeting and it will be publicized

Dave: Is there a letter that the Cultural Council drafted? I don't know if Commission would endorse that letter or sign our names. It is an important thing that has to happen. If I were a student who worked on this or parent of a student and I saw nothing about this, I would be bummed.

We need to see this as a red flag, move to not let it happen again. I would be in favor of a response now.

Was the Mass Cultural Council notified about what happened?

Stephanie: Not that I know of.

Nora: we might want to ask the town who was notified.

Tova – Maybe the Mass Cultural Council should be informed

Nora - This was private property. There was a lack of communication. It was a problem. We need to acknowledge the effects of the failure of communication, but need to look forward and how can we make it better by having another project.

The notion of internal vs. external is an artificial division. We are all going to be talking about this. We have big mouths. This is not just internal.

Tova - One question for me personally moving forward. People have been saying, "Did you see what happened? did you see?" I have been holding back on my response. I have added a note that is has been destroyed, but I need an explanation. Don't want to step on toes, but I need to stand up as an artist.

Nora, Kurt, Scott: You didn't have to hold back. It was thoughtful, but you didn't need to. Go right ahead and post your response.

Whatever we are going to do, it has to be done in a way that has lasting effect.

Dave: Someone made a decision that the mural wasn't good enough or important enough or maybe because it was on private property, but we as a Commission are going to raise the level of respect for art in a systemic way.

Howard: Someone decided to make a change without a process when so much effort went into this. Bam. Its gone.

It is Important that there be a process to destroy public art.

Nora: this is not the last time we are going to talk about this issue.

8:43 – this portion of the meeting concluded. Minutes back to a usual format from here on

ITEM: 2 Report to town

We were put off by the Board of Selectmen until May 13.

Town meeting will probably be done by then, so so we should submit our report to Town Meeting on monday.

Barbara will draft the report.

Stephanie will send line re history and Arlington Alive and momentum behind public art.

Barbara will contact Jane re Vision 2020s involvement

ITEM 3; Approval of minutes
unanimously approved “with gratitude”

ITEM 4: Our role

Fulfilling our role of advising the town

We decided to start devoting 30 minutes of each meeting to meeting with a different cultural organization or relevant town official to figure out our relationships to the other entities in town and what our most useful role might be.

Nora will reach out to our new Director of Economic Development and invite him to our next meeting

ITEM 5: Debrief about tonight

We were just told this meeting would happen. We were not necessarily prepared. We thought we would have a chance to review the plan for the meeting and then schedule it with time to prepare.

There was disagreement among the two person subcommittee about how much time we should devote to this issue and how directly we as a Commission should be involved.

Scott Samenfeld, one of the members of the subcommittee resigned in frustration over the lack of attention and action being taken on this issue. He submitted a written statement to the Commissioners (Amendment to minutes?)

The Cultural Council is a major stakeholder and it was suggested that this body take this issue on more fully and directly.

The possibility of staging another meeting cosponsored by the same organizations as Arlington Alive was also proposed in order to be able to examine the issue from all sides to find out what happened, and hear from all stakeholders to craft a policy that met everyone's needs, but in the end the majority of the Commissioners decided that our role was to advise, not to hold meetings like this. It was up to the artists and Dearborn people to make their public statements. It might also be the role of the Arlington Cultural Council who funded the project or Arlington Public Art as spokespeople for public art to make public statements as well and investigate more closely.

Nora shared that she had a conversation with Carol Kowalsk, who is a painter and is disturbed at the implication that she might be complicit in the destruction of art. Carol Kowalski is excited to speak with us and believes that art must be addressed by the town head on. It has to be done the same way we do planning or economic development or anything else. It must be done seriously or done right. She actually had another commitment tonight or she would otherwise have been at this meeting.

It was noted that the town generally has progressed on valuing art in town.

It was decided to write a report that we can circulate, create a press release, inform Dearborn with.

We will continue to have the incident with the Bus Depot mural inform our process as we make recommendations to the Board of Selectmen, beginning with some recommendations.

It was felt by the majority of the Commissioners that this was a public enough action to be taking in light of the fact that our agendas, meetings, and minutes are public and our recommendations will be public.

We took on the responsibility to start the conversation and that is what we have done.

For the next meeting:

Nora will put forward recommendations based on what we heard from Tova, Howard , Scott and Kurt, will circulate and put it on agenda

We will brainstorm about recommendations including maintenance at next meeting.

Agenda for next meeting:

Meeting with Economic Development Coordinator, Ted Fields
Brainstorming re recommendations for public art procedures

Adjourned 10:00pm.